

Who Are We Trying to Impress?

An old African proverb asserts, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Recently this sentiment was echoed in a popular book by Hillary Clinton, which outlined the conditions of a community capable of raising children in a positive environment.

Unfortunately, during the last few generations we have watched the gradual deterioration of the “village” in our nation. With much grief we must agree that our communities are in great need of major renovation—physically, socially, economically and spiritually.

The deteriorating conditions have resulted in a further breaking down of the family and a general disrespect for life. Regrettably, the village has abandoned the children, leaving them unsupervised and hopelessly alone.

The village is no longer qualified or adequately prepared to raise a child because the village itself must be raised. But who will do it?

There can be only one answer: It takes a church to raise a village. This is our day, church, and we must rise up and take responsibility for the village.

It is the church that must establish integrity and biblical standards. We must turn to our Lord for a new empowerment and a fresh filling of His love.

The village is filled with the oppressed and brokenhearted. A spirit of heaviness pervades the cultural atmosphere.

Will we choose to focus on building our own impressive empires of religion, or will we turn our attention to building a new village, empowering those who sit at our very gates?

Now is the time to stand up and extend our hands to these

victims, lifting them up into the loving arms of the Lord who can heal them and give them a living hope.

OUTSIDE THE GATES

Acts 3:1-10 is the account of a man who was carried daily to the temple gate. Religion offered him no other alternative but a beggar's lifestyle.

The story is set outside the gate "Beautiful," a very ornate and impressive doorway into the temple that was covered with gold and other precious metals. Throughout his years of begging, thousands of people had passed him by, oblivious to his desperate need.

His misery provided an opportunity for devout Jews to display their generosity as they quickly entered the temple to get on with their religious exercises. He was the object of the righteous pity of a religious system but remained unhealed.

Then one day Peter and John passed by at the hour of sacrifice, the time when religious men perform their duties. As Peter was about to enter the temple, his heart was seized by this man's condition.

On his way to church, Peter shifted his attention away from the opulent beauty of the religious structure and locked his eyes on this lame man. Out of the deep compassion of his heart, Peter said, "I don't have any worldly thing to impress you with, but I do have something that will change your life and put you on your feet. Rise up in Jesus Christ!" (see v. 6).

Peter chose to set aside religious duty and righteous appearance so that he could change one man's life forever. He did not look upon this poverty-stricken man as an outsider but welcomed him into the community and that day gave him a purpose and an inheritance.

There are so many who sit at our gates—socially and

spiritually lame from the womb, disenfranchised, generationally dysfunctional, educationally disadvantaged and impoverished. What will we do?

Will we continue to pass them by as we make our way to our houses of worship? Or will we reach out and take them by the hand, as Peter did, and raise them up in the name of Jesus Christ? Will we seek to impress the village with our pious efforts or will we impact it eternally with our compassionate exploits?

IMPRESSIVE VS. IMPACTING

Once I was privileged to visit Buckingham Palace, the official town residence of the British monarch since 1837. The structure has approximately 600 rooms and 50 acres of gardens. It is noted for its fine collection of art.

I especially loved the hourly Changing of the Guard at its main gate. The soldiers march in lock step, outwardly oblivious to the surrounding environment.

The ritual is dignified and thrilling to watch. But I was struck by the reality that the residents of the palace have only a semblance of power. The real power now resides in the British parliament.

Enormous amounts of money are spent to maintain the lifestyles of the royal family, along with their artificial sense of authority and power. They may be impressive in all their regal appearance, but they have little impact on their subjects.

In the church, we have similarly set about trying to impress one another with our prosperity. We look down on those in the ministry who are financially deprived as though they have missed God. Worldly wealth has become the new measure of spiritual status.

We have sought to impress one another with our bigger and grander facilities. And we seek to impress the world by

creating our own spiritual royalty in the form of “superstar preachers” who can hold audiences spellbound with their oratorical skills. Unfortunately, we can walk out of those meetings and quickly forget those impressive words that have no relevance to our daily existence.

Some preachers I know spend many hours per week preparing sermons to dazzle their congregations while little is done to equip the saints to establish their own ministries. The reality is that their small staff of pastors can never effectively meet all the needs of the congregation, let alone those in the village.

What we are needing is a major paradigm shift in how the body of Christ functions. We have invested in impressive preachers and facilities. But too often, we have failed to invest in the village.

It’s time to shift our emphasis from building our own kingdoms to repairing the village. It’s time to establish new priorities.

SETTING A KINGDOM AGENDA

If the church is to move beyond hollow attempts at impressing the village with temporary solutions to generational problems, we will have to alter our vision of constructing religious empires that result in keeping outsiders from entering.

If we are to impact the village, we have to reorder how we use our time and the Lord’s money. Our priority must become the establishment of the kingdom of God in the midst of the village.

Several items on our new agenda will require special attention if we are to have the eternal impact on our communities that God intends.

- Our first concern must be focusing resources on the village. Our facilities should support the ministry of

the church rather than the church having to support empty, irrelevant facilities. Sadly, it seems that we can always raise money to build new buildings, but then we struggle to find funds to meet the pressing needs of the community.

- Another kingdom priority is equipping and empowering the whole body in the ministry of the head. If we are to restore the village, it will take a corporate effort—a team rather than an individual.
- A third spiritual shift involves changing our church programs, especially those for youth. Youth programs can become valuable tools to reach the lost young people in the village and our social functions should be opportunities to others in the neighborhood to join us.

We must get involved in the life of the village. We cannot restrict the body of Christ to ministering solely inside the church walls.

All areas of life are God's business. We must shift the emphasis from church order and government to the believer's effective involvement in the world around him.

Jesus was concerned with reaching those on the outer fringes of society and lifting them out of their misery. As the body of Christ, His concern should be ours, too.

AN EMPOWERING CHURCH

God has given us effective resources that will empower the members of the community, and enable them to rebuild for themselves. The most compelling tools we have are our own people. I like to call them the "jewels in the pews."

Few pastors are aware of this incredible resource. Yet there is more potential power in the pews than behind the pulpit.

Are they teachers? Are they plumbers? What kinds of certifications do they hold? What kind of training might they have? As a leader, you'll discover valuable talent among those

who have been sitting in the pews, waiting to be found.

We also must not fail to take into account the life experiences of those in our congregations. Those who have been wounded can become wounded healers of others in the village.

Every community has distinct and different needs. For some, there will be serious problems with drugs. Others might have an unusual number of single mothers who need help with parenting skills and job training.

If you give your heart to it, the Lord will quickly begin to give you insight and strategies for the particular needs in your community. Do not be overwhelmed by the needs around you. Be sensitive to the Spirit's direction.

Churches can be transformed into empowerment centers. Our church established "Project Impact" to equip families and children for success. We desire to see strong, healthy and self-sufficient families in committed relationships, contributing to the well-being of their communities.

God is calling us out of the temple and into the village. If we want to make a difference, we will have to move away from impressing the village with our stately structures to impacting it with the power of God through the tools that He has provided. The future of the village is in our hands.

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